

Of Extremist Grandmothers

Recalling Banalata Sen and Bina Das, Revolutionaries in the Indian Struggle for Independence

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Women revolutionaries in the Indian struggle for independence are often idealized in textbooks – and in the popular imagination – as *Agnikanya*, firebrand daughters of a subjugated nation. Modern scholarship on the subject has eschewed such idealistic commemorations and examined the conditions that gave rise to a homegrown women's movement in the period following the non-cooperation movement of 1920. A movement is characterized not by isolated acts of violence, but by organized systems of resistance. Such systems, in an occupied country, are supported by clandestine networks of recruitment. At a time when women had limited mobility and higher education came with patriarchal surveillance, the formation of women-led fronts and the induction of women into existing subversive organizations marked a remarkable disruption of the political space. In this article, I attempt an alternative and more intimate recollection of the movement. I do so by documenting the story of my grandmother Banalata Sen (1915-1989), a relatively unsung name among women revolutionaries, whose experiences I interweave with those of Bina Das (1911-1986), a revolutionary who is far more widely recognized.

I interrogate the nature of extremism itself to examine whether it is possible for a revolutionary to reclaim ordinariness in post-independence calm. I also challenge the mutual exclusivity of Gandhian civil disobedience and armed resistance by uncovering the composite identities of these revolutionaries. My deeply personal connection with the subject allows me to record narratives that incorporate instances of vulnerability, conflict, and disillusionment. In this sense, I acknowledge Manju Chattopadhyay's call to depict revolutionary women as *rakta-mangsher manush* (women of flesh and blood).¹ Bina Das and Banalata Sen enjoyed a long friendship. I explore how a solidarity forged during the freedom movement transcended differences in their backgrounds, political ideologies, and subjectivities.

Prison narratives

In the summer of 1964, my grandmother Banalata Sen and my mother Susmita Rakshit paid an unannounced visit to Ujjala Majumdar at her residence in Park Circus, Calcutta. Ujjala's words upon opening the door were, "*Satya ghatana noy, Bana.*" ("Cannot be true, Bana.") My mother's recollection of the precise words – decades later – is linked to the transfiguring power of the moment. This was the first meeting of the two revolutionaries after their time in Presidency Jail in the mid-1940s. Aside from reminiscing about political activism, the women also recalled their roles in the Tagore play, *Raktakarabi* ("Red Oleanders"), which was staged on the prison grounds. Both enacted male roles since there was no opportunity for collaborating with male prisoners. Yet, on occasions, late at night, a resonant voice singing Tagore songs would carry over to the female ward.²

Women revolutionaries spent a significant part of their youth as political prisoners. Universally, they regarded these years as time irretrievably taken away from their mission, and longed to return to organizational and subversive work. The autobiographies of Bina Das and Kamala Dasgupta, both compatriots of my grandmother in Presidency Jail, provide insights into the process of adapting to the prison system and into attempts at subversion while in confinement. Bina Das was convicted in 1932 for the attempted assassination of

Stanley Jackson, Governor of Bengal. She spent the next six years in several prisons in Bengal. She was again arrested in 1942 during the Quit India movement and spent the next four years in Presidency Jail.³ Banalata Sen was also arrested in 1942 at the height of the Quit India movement, and she was held without trial at Presidency Jail until 1945.

The British prison was a layered bureaucracy comprising superintendents, jailers, deputy jailers, clerks, matrons, and janitors. There were separate wards for political prisoners and convicted criminals in addition to cells for lepers and mental patients. Despite the relative privileges afforded to political prisoners, experiences of alienation and suffocation were shared across partitions. Kamala Dasgupta recalls how she and Bina Das used a crack in the wall above a putrid drain to catch sight of trains beyond the Hijli Jail compound.⁴ Incidentally, Hijli Jail is now part of the campus of my alma mater, the Indian Institute of Technology. "Were those years wasted?" is a question repeated throughout Das' memoir, *Shrinkhal Jhankar* ("Ringing Chains"). During a reunion of Dasgupta and Das at Hijli, Bina relived her failure to assassinate Governor Jackson. Kamala responded that the attempt itself had served to "shake the foundations of British rule." Despite such moments of despondency, Das' assessment of political imprisonment remained largely constructive. In her view, every wave of mass political imprisonment strengthened the larger freedom movement by exposing British repression and progressively broadening participation. The voice of *Shrinkhal Jhankar* is frequently imbued with idealism. Her role, even in incarceration, was "to teach a supplicant race the lesson of embracing death."⁵

The prison years enabled a gradual evolution of Das' political ideology from one of armed extremism to a composite revolutionary identity. Adopting Gandhian methods, she led inmates on a hunger strike in Midnapore Jail to protest various forms of physical violence and harassment by a particular jailer. A direct association with Gandhi began when he visited Alipore Jail and she was unafraid to debate him on his rigid adherence to non-violence. Nearly a decade later, they would walk together, barefoot, on a relief mission in riot-torn Noakhali. Her commitment to labor and mass movements can also be traced

to prison kinship networks. These networks transcended class boundaries and included women convicts in the general wards. She views such women as subversive figures, whether in their retaliation against male violence or even through their petty theft of food during the British-engineered famine of 1943.⁶

Similarly, Banalata Sen recalls her incarceration as a period of ideological development and enrichment. At the time of her arrest, she was a member of the newly formed Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) and, previously, of the Marxist wing of *Anushilan Samity*. *Anushilan* and *Jugantar* were the two original revolutionary nationalist organizations in Bengal. Prison gave Banalata an opportunity to meet seasoned revolutionaries, including Bina Das, Kamala Dasgupta, and Ujjala Majumdar, who had been involved in the earlier wave of direct attacks on British officials. The female yard in Presidency Jail became a forum of political debate, which allowed Banalata to evaluate her radical commitments against the moderate principles of the Indian National Congress. Kamala Dasgupta writes of a reading circle comprising herself, Banalata, Pratibha Bhadra, and Nirmala Ray. Banalata's passion was for discussing *Anti-Dühring* by Engels. The debates, which carried on till the early hours and were particularly animated by Banalata's analysis, "stirred the stagnant waters of prison life."⁷

Detenus at Presidency Jail and Hijli Jail had access to the collection of the Imperial Library, and they could also request books from university libraries. Banalata utilized such materials to complete her M.A. in Economics during imprisonment. She was conferred the formal degree upon her release in 1945.

Accounts of the freedom movement: 1925-1947

A comparison of the lives of Banalata Sen and Bina Das reveals the difficulty in constructing an archetypal female revolutionary who disrupted both the Bengali middle-class patriarchy and the rigid formalism of British rule. Das received an essentially British education in Cuttack and Calcutta and recalls a fulfilled upbringing in a liberal Brahmo household. She recalls

Fig. 1: Reunion of Revolutionaries, including Nirmala Acharja, Banalata Sen, Pratibha Bhadra, Kamala Dasgupta, Bina Das, Indusudha Ghosh, Suniti Choudhury, and others, circa 1982 (Photo from the author's family archives).



imbibing *swadeshi* principles from her father and her elder sister Kalyani Das. The former taught Subhash Bose (1897-1945), the architect of the Indian National Army, and the latter founded the women's front, *Chhatra Sangha*. This was a time when the Gandhi-led non-cooperation movement and the Simon Commission boycott nurtured a new, though still fragile, nationalist identity.

Das' early training under the aegis of the Bengal Volunteers prepared her for a *hartal* ("strike") on the Bethune College campus in 1928. As a student at Bethune and Diocesan College, she became an avid recruiter of fellow students to the revolutionary movement. Contemporaneous acts of armed insurrection – for instance, the Chittagong Armory Raid of 1930 and an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate police commissioner Charles Tegart – galvanized the *biplabi* ("revolutionary") front. Such events led Das to eschew Gandhian principles in favor of focused underground activity.⁸ Kamala Dasgupta, who was involved in the secret storage and distribution of arms to revolutionaries, records an intimate account of this transformation: "She was a gentle, emotional girl, also an intellectual and first in her class. An idealism shone on her face ... She covered her face when I asked her to consider the shock to her parents. 'Don't tell them, please.'" Das had gone to Dasgupta to procure a revolver for an assassination attempt on Governor Stanley Jackson. The attempted assassination at the Calcutta University convocation, the trial of Bina Das, and her eloquent confession have been widely covered in historical and nationalist texts, fostering an ethos of female revolutionary courage and sacrifice.

Unlike Bina Das, Banalata Sen's patriotism did not crystallize from familial ideological influences. Her father, was a successful *kabiraj* ("Ayurvedic practitioner") who supported a rural estate in Kartikpur, Bangladesh. Banalata had six sisters and two brothers; many of her siblings died young. There was no expectation to pursue studies beyond a semi-formal early education. Her eldest sister was married off young to an older groom with an earlier wife and child, and she endured a long widowhood. But Banalata successfully resisted patriarchal interventions and managed to realize her academic ambitions. Her subsequent

nationalist work was woven into her academic life with a deliberate precision. Matriculating with distinction as a private candidate, Banalata moved to Calcutta to seek intermediate studies. To fund her education in Calcutta, she first took a basic training course and found employment as a primary teacher. Details of this period are unreliable: neither my mother nor my aunt can convincingly reconstruct the process by which a female student of about 20 years old, settled on her own in an unfamiliar city, secured boarding and employment, and pursued her education. Banalata was possibly assisted by Satyaranjan Sen, an elder cousin who was settled in Calcutta. Such linkages in an extended family, clustered in rural Bengal but spreading across nodal towns to the capital, provided a resilient support network to women revolutionaries.

Banalata's intermediate and undergraduate education was at Women's College, Calcutta. She was among the first cohorts to graduate from this institution. Morning classes allowed her to continue teaching in the afternoon and work as a private tutor during the evenings. Subsequently, she pursued a Master of Arts in Economics at Calcutta University. Throughout her student years, Banalata resided in a women's hostel in North Calcutta. Claiming the hostel as accommodation and private tuition as supplemental income was an exigency for a female migrant student. These domains were not yet receptive to women in a city where even unaccompanied commuting was unpleasant. Manikuntala Sen, who founded the women's front, *Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti*, and Kamala Dasgupta were also boarders in North Calcutta. Dasgupta, who supervised such a hostel, also used it as a storage site for arms used in revolutionary missions.

Banalata's revolutionary work began with her induction into *Anushilan Samity* while a student at Women's College. During the 1920s and early 1930s, *Anushilan* had orchestrated armed attacks on British administrative officials. By the late 1930s, when Banalata joined the organization, it had tempered its methods and formed an ideological coalition with Subhash Bose. Her first underground activity was to aid political prisoners who had escaped from Alipore Jail, Calcutta, and had taken shelter in a hideout in Titagarh.¹⁰ At the time, she was a prominent member of the Students' Federation and served as General Secretary of the All-Bengal Girls' Students Committee. Like Bina Das, she actively recruited students into the revolutionary fold.¹¹ The college campus proved both a crucible of nationalist ideas and a site of subversion. In 1937, she rallied in a movement to free political prisoners. This movement, spearheaded by Gandhi, secured the early release of many

revolutionaries, including Bina Das. In 1938, Banalata traveled to the Haripura Congress, a pivotal session where Subhash Bose advocated radical militancy.¹²

From 1939-1942, both Banalata and Bina were involved in organizational work and mass protests, though they espoused divergent ideologies. Despite her family connection to Subhash Bose, Bina chose to align with the main wing of the Congress in Bengal. She travelled widely to recruit women to the nationalist cause. When in Calcutta, she worked as General Secretary of the South Calcutta Congress wing until her arrest at a rally during the Quit India movement of 1942. Banalata continued her work for the Bose wing (Forward Bloc) as a courier and a bearer of provisions to his residence, where he remained under house arrest until his escape to Germany in 1941. After the dissolution of *Anushilan Samity*, Banalata joined the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) and worked in both labor and nationalist movements. Banalata was an essential recruiter and organizer of protest marches in North Calcutta during the August revolution of 1942. The high drama of the protest that led to her arrest has remained an enduring fixture in our family history. That day, the ferocity of a police raid took the activists by surprise. Banalata, who led the rally, fell on her face during the ensuing stampede but survived police boots and batons on her back. She retreated to hiding on the advice of party *dadras*, who put up posters at University Institute Hall demanding "revenge for the killing of Banalata Sen." Despite the ruse, she was arrested by police who maintained a reliable network of informants.¹³

Upon release from prison in 1945, Bina and Banalata stepped into a nation "plagued by famine, inflation and ordnances."¹⁴ They became active in labor movements and unions on behalf of the Congress and the RSP, respectively. Both served in relief missions for Hindu-Muslim riot victims. Banalata's reminiscences of the Great Calcutta killings and her work in ravaged neighborhoods remain haunting memories. Bina Das served mainly in relief camps in Noakhali, where waves of violence followed the riots in Calcutta.¹⁵

Quiescence and disquietude: 1947-1989

The memory of a particular Sunday in the early 1980s has stayed with me. I spent the day with my grandmother at Vivekananda College, Calcutta, where she taught economics. It was Annual Celebration Day, and a foyer had been repurposed for staging

sack and spoon races. Afterwards, Banalata introduced me to a professor of chemistry, who took me on a tour of the wet laboratory. I remember the complete ordinariness of the day, Banalata indistinguishable from other professors watching children trip over potatoes on the course. I view an extremist grandmother as a figure who can inhabit such ordinariness without compromising her radical identity. On other days she was a raconteur who could reconstruct a police charge on Amherst Street as she calmly crisped pumpkin blossoms on high heat.

Banalata had envisioned a teaching career even while taking the M.A. examination in prison. Her first appointment was at Tangail College, Bangladesh, in 1947, the same year that my mother was born. My grandfather Saroj Chakravarty, also a freedom fighter, stayed in Calcutta, where he was the editor of a Bengali daily *Pratyaha*. After briefly rejoining him in his one-room flat on Harrison Road, Banalata took up a teaching position in Bhagalpur, Bihar. In a reversal of gender roles, Banalata was then the primary breadwinner of the family. She was also the caregiver of my mother. Around 1951, the family moved to Jalpaiguri, a suburban town in North Bengal, where they set up a single-family home with a small dairy farm. While teaching economics at the local college, Banalata also pursued a PhD on women's labor in the tea industry. Despite compiling data from fieldwork, she was unable to finish the project. Saroj, who had completed his law degree in prison, set up a successful practice. The family moved back to Calcutta in the early 1960s, primarily for my mother's college education following her matriculation. Banalata joined Vivekananda College and taught there until her retirement.

Banalata evinced a thrill in this restive settlement and migration which was akin to an immigrant experience. She had stepped into a country which was ancient yet newly imagined. It was a country experimenting with changing models of governance, industry, and education. The weave of Calcutta streets had hardly changed in thirty years. She remained an educator, yet there was a settled household to return to at the end of the daily commute, in contrast with the days of processions, underground missions, and surveillance. Despite such earned comforts, Banalata, like Bina Das and other freedom fighters, felt a duty to actively participate in the political sphere in post-independence India. After moving to Kolkata, Banalata steered clear of electoral politics but was nominated to the Calcutta University Senate, where her work centered on teacher recruitment and benefits. This role was a far cry from the revolutionary idealism of the pre-independence years. Banalata acknowledged that she had become part of a bureaucracy designed to establish leftist hegemony in academic institutions. She did not seek a second term on the board and distanced herself from party politics. She spent her spare time teaching slum children and contributing articles on revolutionaries to *Anushilan Barta*, the original organ of *Anushilan Samity*. The nationalists who particularly inspired her were Madame Bhikaji Cama (1861-1936), Bhagat Singh (1907-1931), and Ashfaqullah Khan (1920-1927).

For Bina Das, who remained with the Congress, the disillusionment with the leadership of her own party came as early as the celebration of independence. She documents her disbelief when Indian military officers – who held the King's Commission and were, therefore, imperial symbols – were invited for the guard of honor at Delhi. Das served as elected member of the legislative assembly in West Bengal, India until 1951, but she withdrew from subsequent election cycles. She was also involved in the labor rights movement as a trade union activist, but even there, she was unable to reconcile her principles with the atmosphere of corruption.¹⁶ Like Banalata, she found a measure of solace as an educator. She taught English at a girls' school in south Calcutta.

The two women enjoyed a close relationship after Banalata's return to Calcutta. My mother recalls visiting "Bina Mashi's" home in Jodhpur Park and discussing passages from her book *Pitridhan* with her. A Sunday reunion of

women revolutionaries in the early 1980s, coordinated and hosted by Banalata at her house, remains vivid in my memory [Fig. 1]. Among those present were Bina Das, Kamala Dasgupta, Suniti Choudhury, Indu Sudha Ghosh, and Pratibha Bhadra. The light streaming on their faces through a screen of ixoras was far different from the pallor in the female yard of Presidency Jail. I was at that reunion and sensed the gentle recapture of a spirit that did not belong in a fixed temporal frame. Whether in a British prison or in that gathering, such a consciousness was a manifestation of freedom itself. The house (which remains my parental home) resonated that afternoon with the verses of *Bande Mataram* by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. I recall my mother joining in.

The last days of Banalata Sen and Bina Das were spent in relative obscurity. Yet, the news of their deaths (separated by about two years) triggered a brief rush of commemoration, mostly under the aegis of the respective political parties for which they had once worked. I walked in the modest procession to Kalighat, where Banalata's body was taken for cremation. Officials of the RSP briefly spread the red flag of the party on her body with a cry, *Biplabi Banalata Sen amar rahe* ("May revolutionary Banalata Sen live on"). The flag was then discreetly rolled away. Kamala Dasgupta, perhaps the only author to document Banalata's biography, penned an obituary in a Bengali daily.

Bina Das concludes *Shrinkhal Jhankar* with an avowal of tireless work: "My journey remains unfinished."¹⁷ Her last physical journey was almost a pilgrimage. She took a trip to Varanasi, Haridwar, and Rishikesh in 1986, after the death of her husband Jatish Bhowmik. Her body was found on the road to Rishikesh and was identified by relatives to whom she had written from Varanasi.¹⁸ My mother, who attended her memorial service, recalls the tribute of Phulrenu Guha, a political and revolutionary colleague of Bina Das. Guha invoked the moment from 1932 when Bina fired on Governor Jackson.

Despite intermittent amnesia, it is likely that Bina Das will shine in national remembrance, if only because of that attempted assassination, an act that became symbolic of women's militancy in the Indian freedom movement. As recently as 2021, a postage stamp was released to honor her. Names such as Banalata Sen, however, will be forgotten because there is no brilliant singularity in her life that will merit sustained commemoration. Yet, such women are also remarkable because of their distinctive identities and their choices of resistance. A reconstruction of the women's revolutionary movement would be incomplete without the examination of such histories.

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Notes

- 1 Manju Chattopadhyay, 'Biplabi Andolone Nari: Kichhu Bhabna, Kichhu Prashna', *Itihas Anusandhan*, Vol. 20 (2006), 651.
- 2 Kamala Dasgupta, 'Rakter Akshare' (Kolkata: Sourendranath Basu, 1956), 141.
- 3 Bina Das, *Shrinkhal Jhankar* (Kolkata: Jayasree, 1956)
- 4 Dasgupta, 'Rakter Akshare', 99.
- 5 Das. Translation, mine.
- 6 Das, *Shrinkhal Jhankar*.
- 7 Dasgupta, 139.
- 8 Das, *Shrinkhal Jhankar*.
- 9 Dasgupta, 53-54. My translation.
- 10 Kamala Dasgupta, 'Swadhinata Sangrame Banglar Nari' (Kolkata: Basundhara, 1956).
- 11 Banerjee, Gobinda Lall, 'Dynamics of Revolutionary Movement in India. Calcutta' (S.K. Ghosh, 1966), 79.
- 12 Interview with Sudipta Kaviraj, June 2022.
- 13 Dasgupta, 260-262.
- 14 Das. Translation, mine.
- 15 Das.
- 16 Samita Sen, 'Gender and the Politics of Class: Women in Trade Unions in Bengal', *Journal of South Asian Studies* (2021).
- 17 Das, 127.
- 18 Television interview, Kalpana Das, niece of Bina Das, December 2021.



Fig. 2: Banalata Sen (left) with her younger sister, Kusum Sen at a North Calcutta Studio, circa 1946 (Photo from the author's family archives).